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ABSTRACT

In response to concerns about the academic and discipline problems of young black male students in a small southern town, the Positive Impact Program (PIP) was developed for at-risk black males. Two possible at-risk factors, locus of control and the quality of parental verbal interaction, were studied for participants in the PIP. Locus of control and communications with parents were compared to those of previously normed groups. Subjects were 42 black males in grades 6, 7, and 8 identified as at-risk by teachers. The sample was found to be more externally controlled than the normative sample of same-age students, but equivalent to that of previously studied at-risk groups. The Verbal Interaction Questionnaire (developed by P. C. Blake in 1991) scores were comparable to those for rural predominantly white male and female high school students. In general, students more internally controlled reported having more positive parental verbal communication, while those more externally controlled had more negative parental verbal communication. Eighteen of the 42 boys were in the PIP, but no significant differences were found for these students on either measure, and no locus of control scores were available from the period before PIP participation. Additional program evaluation will be conducted. One table contrasts students in the PIP and non-PIP groups. (SLD)

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INTERNAL/EXTERNAL LOCUS OF CONTROL AND PARENTAL VERBAL INTERACTION OF AT-RISK ADOLESCENT BLACK MALES

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Internal/External Locus of Control and Parental Verbal Interaction of At-risk Adolescent Black Males

The school and community in a small southern town were concerned about the academic and discipline problems of many of their students. Several black men recognized that many of the at-risk students were young black males who came from low socio-economic families and many did not have an adult male role model at home. Because of their concern, 16 black men developed PIP, the Positive Impact Program for at-risk black males (Cobbs, 1992). These 16 advisors came from a wide variety of backgrounds, ranging from being college educated to not having graduated from high school. The program has been active since 1990 and has received broad community and school support.

Since the Positive Impact Program could only accommodate a limited number of students, teachers were asked to identify the students who they felt were most at-risk. When admitted to PIP, students meet weekly in small groups with their advisor. Every month all PIP members meet as a large group for an activity.

Other than some anecdotal information, few systematic investigations have been conducted on the at-risk students in PIP. In one study of junior high at-risk black males including students in PIP, Cobbs (1992) investigated the change in achievement as measured with both standardized test scores and grades. Students' relative standing in their classes on standardized tests improved over one year. However, this may have been due to the change of tests used by the school district. Yet, grades for these students dropped over the same period. This drop, however, may have been a school phenomenon and not limited to only these at-risk students.

Two additional measures of concern regarding these at-risk adolescent black males were the focus of the present investigation. These possible at-risk factors were locus of control and the quality of parental verbal interaction. Although there is much in the literature on locus of control, few recent studies have investigated this characteristic with at-risk populations. In a study of at-risk elementary students, Payne and Payne (1989) investigated race and gender difference in internal/external locus of control. Significant differences were found only in risk status and grade level of the student. At-risk students were more externally oriented than students not at risk. Also, younger students were more externally oriented than older students. No significant differences in internal/external locus of control were noted for gender and race.

The second variable of interest in this investigation was the parent's communication with the child. Blake (1991) developed an instrument to assess the child's perceived quality of parental verbal interaction. Blake and Slate (1993) investigated the amount of verbal abuse reported by students who lived with one and two parents. No significant differences were noted. No studies to date have been conducted on parental verbal interaction for at-risk populations. Also, no studies have investigated the relationship between parental verbal interaction and internal/external locus of control.

Objectives

The purpose of this study was (a) to compare the internal/external locus of control of these at-risk black males to previous norm groups, (b) to compare their verbal interaction to previous norm groups, (c) to determine if a relationship exists between internal/external locus of control and parental verbal interaction, and (d) to compare the adolescent black males in PIP with those not in PIP on internal/external locus of control and parental verbal interaction.

Method

Subjects

Forty-two black males in grades 6, 7 and 8 who had been identified at-risk served as subjects in this study. A set of eight characteristics had been used by teachers to identify at-risk students for the Positive Impact Program for at-risk black males (Cobbs & McCallum, 1992). Along with the student's family status, the at-risk characteristics included: low self-esteem, lack of motivation, poor academic record, chronic disciplinary problems, poor school attendance, poor hygiene and personal-care habits, poor social skills, and a disrespect for authority.

The academic performance of these subjects was reported in an earlier investigation (Cobbs, 1992). On the average, these subjects fell 0.5 to 0.8 standard deviations below their class averages in Stanford Achievement Test results. Their grade point average was 1.85 (s=.69) on end-of-year school grades, based on the 4.00 grading scale (A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1, F=0). A lower socioeconomic status was noted since three-fourths of the subjects received free lunch at school. Most of the subjects (88%) lived in a one-parent home or with a guardian.

Instrumentation

Locus of Control (LOC). The Children's Nowicki-Strickland Internal-External Locus of Control Scale (LOC) was used to measure internal/external locus of control expectancies (Nowicki & Strickland, 1973). The child was asked to respond "yes" or "no" to each of 40-items. A response reflecting the child was internally controlled would be one which indicated he believed that outcomes were contingent upon his efforts. A response reflecting the child was externally controlled would be one which indicated he saw little relationship between his efforts and events that affected him. The possible scores on the Nowicki-Strickland LOC scale range from zero (internal) to 40 (external). This LOC scale has been reported as a reliable and stable instrument with internal consistency reliability of $r = .68$ for grades 6, 7 and 8 (Nowicki & Strickland, 1973) and $r = .65$ for grade 6 (Halpin & Ottinger, 1983).

Nowicki and Strickland identified two abbreviated LOC scales appropriate for grades three through six and for grades seven through 12 (Nowicki & Strickland, 1973; Lefcourt, 1991). Since the population under investigation in this study were students in grades 6, 7 and 8, the full LOC scale and both sub-scales were used in the analysis.

Verbal Interaction Questionnaire (VIQ). The Verbal Interaction Questionnaire (VIQ) was used to measure the child's perception of the quality of parental verbal interaction (Blake, 1991). The student was asked to respond to each of the 30-items with "often", "sometimes" or "never" to best describe the interaction he received from

his parent(s)/guardian(s). The possible scores for VIQ range from zero (negative verbal interaction) to 90 (positive verbal interaction).

For a sample of 197 southern, rural, predominantly white, male and female high school students, Blake and Slate (1993) reported a mean score of 63.39 (s=18.21) and median score of 68. They found a coefficient alpha reliability of r = .94 for this administration of the VIQ. The reliability coefficient reported for the VIQ compared favorably to the reliability of an earlier scale described by Straus (1979). The parent-child verbal aggression component of the Conflict Tactics Scales used by Straus had an internal consistency of r = .77.

Procedures

Prior to administration of the LOC and VIQ questionnaires, release forms were obtained from participants, parents and school officials. Student anonymity was assured and maintained throughout the study. The school counselor administered the three instruments to the 42 subjects in one sitting. The counselor read the items as the students followed and marked on their own form. A second proctor, familiar to the students, remained in the room but did not circulate to observe responses.

Results

The average LOC score was 16.45 (s=4.40) for these 42 at-risk adolescent black males. This LOC mean was significantly higher ($t=3.104$, $p<.05$) than the 13.93 composite average (s=4.80) based on reported averages for males in grades 6, 7 and 8 by Nowicki and Strickland (1973). The coefficient alpha reliability for this administration of the Nowicki-Strickland LOC scale was r = .594.

For this administration of the VIQ to 42 at-risk adolescent black males, the coefficient alpha reliability estimate was r = .859. This internal consistency reliability estimate was similar to the r = .94 reliability reported by Blake and Slate (1993). For the at-risk students in the present study, the mean score on the VIQ was 63.76 (s=12.20) and the median score was 63.17.

No significant relationship was found between the VIQ and the full-scale Nowicki-Strickland LOC scale ($r = -.226$, $p>.05$) nor between the VIQ and the grades 3-6 LOC scale ($r = -.247$, $p>.05$). However, a significant relationship was noted between the VIQ scale and the grades 7-12 LOC scale ($r = -.262$, $p<.05$).

Comparisons of at-risk students in PIP and at-risk students not in PIP are shown in Table 1. No significant differences between the two groups were noted on the VIQ, full-scale LOC, grades 3-6 LOC sub-scale, and grades 7-12 LOC sub-scale. Likewise, no significant differences were noted between the correlations for students in PIP and students not in PIP for the VIQ and three LOC scales.

Discussion

The Cobbs (1992) study looking at academic achievement of at-risk students both in PIP and not in PIP prompted the interest to look at additional factors to help understand and modify the behavior of the at-risk students. The present study was limited to grade 6, 7, and 8 black male students who had been identified at-risk by their teachers.

Table 1
Contrasts of At-risk Adolescents in PIP
and At-risk Adolescents not in PIP

Scale Comparison		At-risk, in PIP (N=18)	At-risk, not PIP (N=24)	t-stat.	t-prob.
VIQ	Mean	62.61	64.63	-.52	.603
	Std Dev	13.17	11.62		
LOC Full-scale	Mean	16.50	16.42	.06	.952
	Std Dev	4.32	4.55		
LOC Grades 3-6 scale	Mean	8.61	8.79	-.18	.858
	Std Dev	3.13	3.28		
LOC Grades 7-12 scale	Mean	10.00	10.13	-.11	.915
	Std Dev	3.52	3.89		
VIQ with LOC		r = -.208	r = -.243	.11	.912
VIQ with LOC Grades 3-6 scale		r = -.240	r = -.261	.07	.948
VIQ with LOC Grades 7-12 scale		r = -.139	r = -.363	.73	.465

This sample of at-risk black males was found to be more externally controlled than the normative sample of students in grades 6, 7 and 8 reported by Nowicki and Strickland (1973). The subjects in the present study had an average locus of control consistent with the Payne and Payne (1989) study of at-risk elementary students.

The VIQ appears to be a very reliable instrument with the r = .86 internal consistency noted for this sample of at-risk adolescent black males. The mean score of 63.76 (s=12.20) for this sample was comparable to the mean score of 63.39 (s=18.21) reported by Blake and Slate (1993) for rural, predominantly white, male and female high school students. However, in comparing the means and medians in the two studies, the distribution of VIQ scores in the present study was nearly symmetrical, whereas, the distribution of VIQ scores in the Blake and Slate study was negatively skewed. As additional normative results become available, researchers will feel more comfortable using the VIQ scale as a measure of children's perceived quality of parental verbal communication.

The Nowicki-Strickland abbreviated LOC scale for grades 7-12 yielded a low negative relationship between locus of control and perception of parents' verbal communication, as measured with the VIQ scale. In general, students more internally controlled reported having more positive parental verbal communication; students more externally controlled reported having more negative parental verbal communication.

Although 18 of the 42 boys were in PIP, all students had been identified at-risk by their teachers. Participation in PIP was not through random assignment, rather by judgment of which students would benefit most from the program. For this sample of 42 at-risk adolescent black males, no significant differences were found between those in PIP and those not in PIP on internal/external locus of control nor on the perceived quality of parental verbal interaction. Since LOC measures were not available for students prior to their admission to PIP, it could not be determined if LOC had changed after one year's participation in PIP. Subsequent evaluations will include initial assessments and annual reviews of locus of control and parental verbal interaction. Other variables of interest, such as self-esteem, will also be included in these evaluations. To better evaluate the effectiveness of PIP for these boys, the school and the community the program serves, interviews with the advisors, PIP members, parents and guardians, teachers, judicial authorities, and community members will also be conducted and summarized.

Educational Significance of the Study

In the 1990 census, 53.3% of black males were either behind or had dropped out of high school (Census Bureau, 1992). Hopefully, programs such as PIP for at-risk black males will help reduce this trend. Investigation of related variables such as internal/external locus of control and parental verbal interaction may provide greater understanding of the at-risk students being served.

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